Mrs. Sawkins and the Bandit

By WILLIAM CHESTER ESTABROOK

On the afternoon delivery of an October day, the postman handed Mrs. Sarah Sawkins a letter with an Arizona postmark.

"Its from Jane Kilby, I know, she said, and opening it, read:

"Dear Cousin Sarah:—Kent and I have been wondering of late what had become of you. We haven't had more than half a dozen letters from you since your Henry's death and I'm sure you've forgotten to answer my last. I'm going to put a return address on this so I'll know if you got it. If you are alive and as well as we hope you are, why can't you come down and spend the winter with us? It's pretty "wild and woolly" in this part of the territory, but I'm sure you would enjoy it immensely if you're willing to put up with the inconveniences. Everything's as "picturesque" as the railroad folders claim, and there's scads of fun down here, Sarah, that never gets into print.

"We're still up at our mine, pegging away. We're working ten or twelve greasers now, but I've plenty help and won't need to look after anything except to make you have a good time. Kent's going to establish a little stage line betwen here and Cochiti, the station, so we can get down occasionally and see the train, if nothing more. We hope to have it going by the first of the month.

"By the way, do you know Sister Lavina's Willie? He's a runty, stoopy boy, with bad lungs—we thought we'd be doing him a favor to have him come down and drive stage for us. It will keep him in the open, and I guess he won't hurt the other fellow in a case of hold-up. Truly, these holp-ups down here are awfully exaggerated. But if you are caught, keep your hands up and you're as safe as though you were back in Yonkers. I've written that to some of our friends as a joke.

"Now, Sarah, do arrange to come. Can't you be here by the first? It would tickle us to death to have you then for Cousin Alec's wife and her

Surveyed her ample proportions.

two daughters and an old-maid school teacher cousin of Kent's are to be here at that time.

"We ship our ore over the P. & L. and Kent says he can get you transportation immediately if you will let us know. Honestly and truly now I shall expect a letter telling me that you will be here by the first.

"Yours as ever,

"JANE KILBY."

"P. S.—Kent says since you've been a widow now three long years, you might be interested to know that Mr. Tulliver Billings of San Francisco, will be here about the first to see about taking an option on our mine. He's a very wealthy widower and Kent thinks by having you on the ground you might be able to land the sale for us, if nothing else. He's such a tease, isn't he—I mean Kent.

"J. K."

"P. S.—Kent sends love and asks if you're as fat as ever."

A look of romantic interest touched Mrs. Sawkins' face at the first postscript, but it was succeeded by a resentful flush at the second. She smoothed the letter back into the envelope, and going to the hall glass surveyed as much of her ample proportions as the mirror would accommodate.

"If I keep gaining at this rate much longer," she soliloquized, "there won't be any use to think of Mr. Bulliver Tillings, or anybody else."

It may have been the result of her soliloquy that hurried Mrs. Sawkins to accept her cousin's very kind invitation, for hurry she did, even to the extent of going down town to mail her answer.

About a fortnight later she received the following short scrawl from Jane Kilby:

"Dear Cousin:—So hurried; delighted to know you're coming; have heard from the others—will all be here. Kent sends transportation, which gives you plenty time to get here by the first—am so busy.

"Hastily yours,

"JANE."

"P. S.—Kent has just come in to tell me he must have double our present force to get the mine in proper shape for Billings' inspection. Maybe I shall be too busy to meet you at the station—tell the others the reason if I'm not there. I'll have Willie explain but he's so nervous and bashful. Two of my squaws threaten to leave and if they do it will be impossible for me to come the thirty miles to Cochiti.

"J."

"P. S.—An hour later. The squaws have left. Will trust you to Willie—and the Lord."

At eleven o'clock of November the first, the westbound flyer took the siding at Cochiti to wait for the eastbound local, which was seven minutes late. From one Pullman there stepped the generous figure of Mrs. Sarah Sawkins, while from a car further to the rear there alighted a party of four, consisting of a nervous little lady with her two young daughters, and a tall, slender, stern-faced woman who wore glasses and carried a camera strapped to a huge volume entitled "The Philosophy of the Estufa, and Its Racial Significancy Among the Tribes of the Southwest."

Both Mrs. Sawkins and the party intuitively made their way to a three-seated, canvas-topped carriage, presided over by a dangling youth of 18, whose natural attitude seemed to be a sort of compromise between a stupor and a scare. He was capable, however, of telling the arrivals that he was their Cousin Willie, and that he was to drive them immediately to the Kilby's, thirty miles away.

There followed mutual introductions and many expressions of disappointment that the prospective guests had not known of each others' presence on the train. At last they were all comfortably seated except Mrs. Sawkins, and the stage left Cochiti.

The sudden accession of femininity intensified the timid element in Cousin Willie's make-up to such an extent that he promptly forgot the eastbound local, for which he had been told so explicitly to wait. The road was very steep and the team exceedingly slow. They had just got beyond the confines of the camp when at a sudden turn a voice above them called out: "Stop! Hold Up!"

Cousin Willie was the first occupant of the stage to act. His hands flew skyward with such force that they threatened to go through the canvas top. The others, even to the smallest girl, hastily followed his example.

There came to them another command, delivered in a breathless, half-articulate voice. Only one word of it was at all intelligible and that was "down."

"He wants us to get out, I think," ventured Mrs. Sawkins, uncertainly. At the suggestion they all scrambled from their seats to the road where they stood, a forlorn group with up stretched arms.

Thus they awaited the appearance of the bandit, their hearts beating like hammers, their minds confused by this rude initiation into the customs of territorial life. Suddenly, there was a downpouring of pebbles and boulders, a smothered exclamation, and the next instant a man was precipitated at their very feet in a most undignified heap.

It was then that Sarah Sawkins had her inspiration. Like a flash, her duty to herself, to her helpless relatives, to the preservation of the law, was revealed to her. She sprang forward with marvelous quickness for one so large and sat upon the prostrate form, fully, freely and without reserve.

The man groaned, twitched as much as he was able to twitch, and then lay quiet except for an occasional convulsive attempt at breathing.

"Come!" cried Mrs. Sawkins, excitedly to her astonished relatives. "Don't you see I've got him? Come!"

But Fate had never thrown Mrs. Sawkins much among her relatives. She did not know how deeply grounded is the instinct of self-preservation in those loved ones who are bound to us by the strong ties of kinship. She realized it, however, when they started down the road, led by their Cousin Willie, who sped as an arrow shot from the bow. For a moment she gazed after them in astonishment and indignation.

A futile struggle beneath her brought her mind back to her prisoner. She bent slightly in order to see around her generous curves, and looked the bandit full in his upturned face.

"Why—it's an old man!" she gasped involuntarily.

There was a sudden kicking out of his half-imprisoned legs as if he felt the indignity of her remark. He subsided immediately he was compelled to turn his attention to procuring enough air to breathe.

What Mrs. Sawkins saw was a very much tousled and mussed face of a man of perhaps fifty years. His white side whiskers were plentifully besprinkled with the dust and earth that had accompanied his sensational entrance on the scene. His glasses had slipped almost to the point of his nose, giving his round face a most comical touch. His wide blue eyes held a look of fixed and immutable perplexity. His mouth was screwed askew as if to keep back the pain of the weight he was sustaining.

Sarah Sawkins was naturally a kind woman and her heart softened a trifle at sight of him. He made another effort to move and his lips worked tremulously.

"If you want to talk I'll raise a bit," she said, not unkindly.

He nodded feebly.

"I'm a gentleman," he began, "and I protest against such—"

Mrs. Sawkins settled her weight upon him again with decision.

"You shan't talk that way to me," she said coldly. "It's bad enough to hold up a stage and scare people to death, without trying to fib out of it."

"But, madam," he begged feebly.

"Keep still," she commanded, letting herself relax to the fullest, "Don't add falsehood to your list of crimes."

There was silence for a moment and a strange expression settled over the face of the prisoner.

"I'd like to leave a statement of some sort," he moaned, feebly.

A startled look came to Mrs. Sawkins' eyes. She put her palms on the ground and shifted some of her weight to them.

"The fall injured you?" she asked a trifle more gently.

"That was mere play," he sighed.

She looked down at him with growing misgiving. His face was certainly not the hardened one of the criminal. But then, had she not read times without number that the flower of our manhood had been known to engage in such nefarious business? No for once she would not permit the softness of her heart to conflict with her plain duty.

"If you're still here when it's all over," he groaned, "I'm going to ask you to get word to my friend, Kilby, who will probably look after—what's left of me and—"

Mrs. Sawkins flirted spasmodically to one side and burst into tears. The bandit rose slowly and with much difficulty. With a weak pretense at brushing his clothes, he walked stiffly over to a rock and sat down.

"If you'll control yourself madam," he said, "I'll explain my presence here and then I shall expect your explanation which is certainly due me."

He waited patiently for her sobs to cease and began:

"My name is Billings—Tulliver Billings of San Francisco. I am down here at the invitation of Mr. Kilby to look at his mine. I arrived just a

"Why—it's an old man!"

moment ago on the eastbound train. I found the stage for Kilby's had already left, but that by running down the trail I could probably overtake it. I called to the driver to stop. He did, and I asked him to wait till I got down. In coming over that wall I slipped. You know the rest almost—but not quite as well as I. Now," and the twinkle in his blue eyes anticipated the slang, "It's up to you."

When she had finished, they both laughed. It was not the half-hearted laughter that is used to cover an embarassing situation. It began with tremendous vigor and died out of sheer exhaustion.

"If you can manage the team, I think we'd better be going," she finally suggested. "We may pick up some of the other guests between here and Kilbys."

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Three months later Mr. Kent Kilby and wife took a long-cherished trip east.

"I guess you and Tull will keep everything going till we get back," he said to Mrs. Sarah Billings at starting.

And Mrs. Billings glanced at her husband and fetched a blush which, for a woman of her experience, was rather a success.

Change of Mind.

The terrible child had reached the conclusion, after days of anxious thought, that the ideal occupation in life was that of a motorman, fancy-free, debonair, regardless of things generally and not controlled except by the ding-ding of the conductor's bell. This thought was born of the summer time and winter and boreal blasts were not in the kid's mind at all. On Sunday he was walking with his father along Broadway and the cold wind was piercing through his heavy topcoat to his tiny marrows.

"Say, dad," he broke out, "I've been thinking."

"What about?" he was asked.

"The motorman business. I was thinking, as Emerson would say, 'it's on the bum.' Guess I'll be a conductor when I grow up."—Brooklyn Eagle.